

Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors for Older Adults

Throughout life the adoption of Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors contributes to an overall state of wellbeing both physically and psychologically.

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Studies have shown that regardless of culture, ethnicity, race, age, or gender all people benefit from implementing daily healthy lifestyle behaviors. Essential components of Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors include Physical Activity, Healthy Eating, Social Engagement, Stress Management.

Building Blocks of a Healthy Lifestyle

Stress Management

Implementing techniques to reduce stress

Social Engagement

Participating in social activities to enhance well-being



Physical Activity

Engaging in regular exercise to maintain fitness

Healthy Eating

Consuming a balanced diet rich in nutrients

Physical Activity

The maintenance of health and well-being across the life span is significantly affected by the amount of physical activity engaged in daily. Physical activity is defined as any non-sedentary behavior such as:

- standing
- cooking
- gardening
- house cleaning
- walking
- swimming
- sports activities (badminton, tennis, baseball, football etc.)

Regular physical activity can lower the risk for cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. Also, engaging in regular exercise is necessary for managing levels of stress associated with having little control over the situation that is causing the stress such as: diagnosis of a chronic disease, development of a physical disability, depression/anxiety disorders, decline in cognitive functions.

Consistently, studies have shown that the adoption of daily exercise regimen, is associated with improvement in management of chronic disease, improvement in depression/anxiety symptoms, greater clarity in cognitive mechanisms for effective decision making, and overall improvement in physical and mental well-being.

[View our information tool featuring exercise videos designed for older adults.](#)

Healthy Eating

The food we eat determines healthy versus unhealthy physical and cognitive development across the life span. Food choices vary according to family ethnicity, culture, religion and finances. In North America, the UK and Western Europe the food industry has had a huge impact on what people eat due to marketing campaigns that promote the consumption of packaged food high in saturated fats, sugars, and salt.

Furthermore, most packaged foods are replete with unhealthy substances (preservatives, coloring, taste enhancements e.g. trans fats). This has resulted in significant increases in the prevalence of obesity in children and adults. People who are overweight are at greater risk of developing chronic diseases. Also, some people turn to 'bad' food choices when feeling stressed and/or depressed.

Reduction in these health risks is dependent on changing diets combined with increased physical activity. The Mediterranean Diet is recommended as represented in recent adoption of Canada's healthy eating guide.

The recommended diet is:

- largely plant based - vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts and seeds;
- promotes the consumption of fish versus meats
- is low in saturated fats, salt, and sugars.

[View our information tool featuring diet and nutrition tips for older adults.](#)

Social Engagement

Being engaged socially with family, friends and acquaintances provides mutual pleasure and has a beneficial influence on overall health status. Studies have shown that people who have satisfying relationships with family, friends, and their community are happier, have fewer health problems, and manage stress more effectively. In contrast, when close social relationships are lacking there is, a) an increased risk for developing depression; b) an increased likelihood of failing to adhere to medically prescribed medications and wellbeing behaviors and c) an increased risk of experiencing harmful levels of stress.

Stress Management

Stress is a psychophysiological response to a perceived negative life event. A protective function of stress is that it can function as a trigger to take action to ward off a threatening situation – which frequently includes an adrenaline rush plus an increase in other stress hormones. The surge in hormones signals the body to react to imminent danger. Once the threat has been managed the nervous system calms the body.

While stress response yields heightened awareness and competencies for managing life challenges, the chronic experiencing of stress, especially under conditions that are uncontrollable, can result in maladaptive and unhealthy physiological stress responses. Two well-known examples of maladaptive stress

response are high blood pressure and suppression of the immune system. While it is impossible to avoid all sources of stress, effective management of stress varies; some people are more vulnerable to stress than others. Characteristics of individuals who manage stress effectively include; engagement in daily exercise regimen, welcome social support from family and friends, welcome a challenge, feel in control, and believe in their ability to positively influence unforeseen life events.

[View our information tool on managing emotions and dealing with anxiety and depression.](#)

Adoption Challenges

The adoption of these components of Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors is not easy. Behavioral habits accumulated across a lifespan are deeply imbedded in gender, culture, ethnicity and general family life experiences. For example, with no prior experience in engaging in a regimen of daily physical activity, adopting a program of physical activity can be challenging and stressful. Similarly, changing to a diet lower in sugars and fats and foregoing intake of processed foods is not easy especially when location and time factors dictate access to healthy foods. Studies have identified several guidelines for tackling these challenges to habit change:

1. sharing physical activity routine with a family member or friend
2. involving partner and family members in deciding changes in food choices and preparation
3. planning social activities with family and/or friends
4. identifying stress triggers and their optimal management.

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